

Looking at fashion through green-colored glasses: *Vogue*'s sustainable fashion discourse

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“There’s no doubt about it. Our world is going to hell in a hand basket. After a century of abuse, the poor planet is starting to fall apart at the seams” (Leggett, 1990 March, p. 472). Thus began the first editorial devoted to eco-fashion in *Vogue*. Sustainable fashion, slow fashion, eco-fashion; they all appear ideologically at odds with *Vogue*'s core mission to “immerse itself in fashion, always leading readers to what will happen next” (Condé Nast, 2013, n.p.). Each month a new *Vogue* appears on the newsstands or in subscribers’ mailboxes, maintaining an endless cycle of ‘newness’. *Vogue*'s relevance to fashion discourse is illustrated by König's (2006) declaration that “no title resonates with authority and history the way that *Vogue* does” (p. 205). Exploring how the sustainable fashion discourse has emerged and evolved in the pages of *Vogue* offered a new perspective on the positioning of environmental and social activism within the fashion industry.

Under question was how *Vogue* engaged, shaped, and altered the sustainable fashion discourse within the limitations of a high-fashion magazine from 1990-2013. The research contextualizes *Vogue*'s construction, appropriation, and alteration of the sustainable fashion discourse through the discourse-historical approach (DHA). DHA assists diachronic analysis of numerous, heterogeneous texts while still employing critical theories (Wodak 2001, p. 65). The approach ensures the context in which the discourse operates remains present by integrating the historical context directly into the analysis. The researcher constantly moves between the text and the context to construct a narrative. DHA aligns with traditional historical analysis in that emphasis remains on changing representation of social actors over time (Lamb, 2013).

The search included both explicit or socially minded fashion editorials as well as editorials promoting the values of “slow fashion” as discussed by Clark (2008). Additionally, editorials that encouraged sustainability related practices or ideologies in general—whether expressed through culture, food, beauty, or travel—were included. Thus, an inclusive review of the magazine revealed a host of editorials that contributed to a subtle discourse on sustainability. In all, 116 editorials were analyzed.

Analysis resulted in a classification system segmenting the editorials into four distinct ‘eras’. These periods reflected changes in the magazine’s approach to sustainable fashion. A connection between economic and socio-cultural shifts in the United States and the sustainable fashion discourse was observed. The four eras are ‘the era of penitence’ (1990-1994), ‘the covert slow fashion era’ (1995-2005), ‘the golden age of sustainable fashion’ (2006-2009), and ‘the era of the sustainable fashion commodity’ (2010-2013). From this segmentation, a clearer picture of the changing nature of the sustainable fashion discourse emerged.

The findings of this research are many. Most notable was a slow dismantling of sustainable fashion's urgency over time. Though the discourse began with high rhetoric and impassioned statements indicating a need for change as illustrated in the opening quote, as the years progressed the sustainable fashion discourse was integrated more seamlessly with the discourse of the 'new'. Rather than collective action and emphasis on the negative outputs of society requiring changes in behavior, branded fashion commodities—albeit ones made with organic components—were presented as viable avenues for change. Even though *Vogue* included these objects in their pages, the de-legitimization of the aesthetic of sustainable fashion occurred regularly with the incorporation of terms like 'hippie', 'granola', and, to some extent, 'ethnic'. The only sustainable fashion aesthetic that was legitimized by *Vogue* was that of 'eco-chic', a *Vogueism* the blended the sustainable fashion discourse with that of the 'new' discourse.

Robyn Givhan's declaration, "what the fashion industry loves, it woos — then swallows whole" (Givhan, 2014) accurately summarizes the findings in this research. While references to sustainably-minded values and actions appeared throughout the twenty-three years analyzed, these were exceptions in the discourse, not the norm. As one would expect to find in a fashion magazine, the dominant discourse emphasized the 'new' and the ephemeral. The study concludes with a reflection on the value of *Vogue's* contribution to the larger sustainable fashion movement in the industry.

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